

National Competitions as Teaching Tools

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Abstract: This paper delineates the use of a national competition as a teaching tool. We show that the use of collaboration, cooperative, experiential, constructivism and concept application are beneficial to helping students “learn to learn”. The idea of competition encourages students to work together towards a shared goal. The objective of winning a competition serves as a main motivator in using the theories learned in class and applying them to real-world situations while working together. Students are cognizant of a tangible reward when they complete the specified assignment. It offers an incentive and thus increases their motivation. Marketing educators have increasingly incorporated experiential learning in the classroom primarily because of the practicality of the discipline (Brennan, 2014). Furthermore, when students-teachers are interactive and feel they have contributed in some way to the learning process it enhances learning (McLoughlin, 1999). This paper discusses applicable classes used to effectively complete projects judged by business executives in a national competition. We will show that this methodology works and can be applied in the classroom with our current students. Generation Z are more apt to be more involved with companies and activities that are deemed to have social causes. But they are not team players (Igel & Urquhart, 2012). As educators we want to ensure that we meet the needs of this generation in so far as applicability and meaningfulness. Therefore it is prudent to connect the real-world application to the activities we engage in within the classroom. Still we want to emphasize the importance and benefit of team work. Thus a national competition that focuses on social responsibility while improving the livelihood of others seems like an appropriate model to use for this type of instruction.

Key words: collaborative learning; cooperative learning; constructivism; experiential learning; national competition; teaching; marketing; educators

JEL codes: A2, M3, M32, M37

1. Introduction

In preparing for a national competition, an educator is charged with inspiring, encouraging and motivating students to enter these competitions. They then need to provide the objectives and framework in which the students will need to work. Still, there are some students who are not content with ambiguity and in fact are less likely to complete a task if the guidelines are ambiguous. Therefore the onus is on the instructor to place students in groups where those who are comfortable with some element of ambiguity will work with those who need structure.

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For this competition framework, there were a few methodologies used to ensure successful completion; experiential learning and cooperative, collaborative and constructivism learning techniques. When researched it was found that cooperative techniques accounted for an average of 17-percentile-point gain in student learning (Igel & Urquhart, 2012; as cited in Dean, Hubbell, Pitler, & Stone, 2012). Further, to improve learning it is not enough to put people in groups and hope for the best. One has to be strategic about implementing this practice, the idea is to develop social learning. Based on this premise, there has been structural development over the years to encourage this methodology thus fostering cooperative learning (Igel & Urquhart, 2012).

This paper will discuss how the ultimate goal of winning a national competition was used as a motivator to help students learn how to learn, while using teaching methodologies to achieve this objective. The paper provides an overview of how the instructor and students incorporated these methodologies for project completion and enhanced learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cooperative Learning

According to Johnson et al. (2009), cooperative learning met much resistance and was never adapted in the classroom until 1980. The culture in the past 60 years was based on a “survival of fittest”; a competitive environment which ensued for many years. A student was basically on their own to achieve their own merits and accolades. But, this methodology was highly criticized and thus the idea of *rugged individualism* emerged; whereby individual students were isolated from each other and thus learned independently (Johnson et al., 2009). This method was clearly no better than the first and was criticized by social scientists who opined that social interaction, peer interaction and socialization are essential to learning (Johnson et al., 2009; as cited in Hartup, 1976; D. W. Johnson, 1980; D. W. Johnson & R. Johnson, 1981d; Ladd, 1999; Lewis & Rosenblum, 1975).

Johnson et al. (2009) argued that although cooperative learning was not widely accepted as previously mentioned until 1980, this methodology was used at the University of Minnesota to train teachers to effectively use small groups in their teaching methods (D. W. Johnson, 1970; D. W. Johnson & R. Johnson, 1974).

The premise of cooperative learning stems from the social interdependence theory; whereby an individual's outcome is affected by both their action and the action of others (D. W. Johnson & R. Johnson, 1989). Johnson et al. (2009) argued that when group members have a common goal they tend to become more interdependent and develop a state of tension until such goal is achieved (Johnson et al., 2009; K. Lewin 1935, 1948). The group is in essence a dynamic whole so that if any one individual changes the entire team changes; it's essentially a domino effect.

The idea that competition is introduced into a group dynamic seems to be prudent for this paper. So if constructive competition becomes a factor to measure the success of a group, individuals within that group are propelled to perform for the ultimate good of the group. Competition is therefore a constructive mechanism for group sync and individual performance (Johnson et al., 2009). If the group members feel that winning is not that important, there is a possibility that the participants have a chance of winning and the criteria for winning are clear, that is specific rules and procedures are salient then competition tends to be more constructive (Johnson et al., 2009).

2.2 Collaborative Learning

According to Gokhale (1995), “collaborative learning” is an instruction method based on the premise that a

group of students are working together for a common goal. The learning method is interdependent; each student assist the other to achieve mutual success.

This methodology fosters “group think” and adds to critical thinking capabilities. If students are able to discuss their internal thoughts and brainstorm with one another it invariably fosters critical thinking (Gokhale, 1995; Totten, Sills, Digby, & Russ, 1991).

The National competition project used in this situation required a great deal of critical thinking and using this methodology proved very effective. Students had to meet with each other to discuss the problems that existed in the company. They were to each offer what they thought were solutions to the problems using theories learned in class and substantiate their assertions. If students are required to seek out factual information, discuss, clarify and evaluate their ideas then collaboration seemed to be one of the tools to use to enhance these results (Gokhale, 1995). The instructor’s role in all these instances was to serve as a facilitator for learning with a view of developing and enhancing student’s ability to learn (Gokhale, 1995).

Similar to cooperative learning there must be an ultimate goal that students are working towards and according to Slavin (1989), there must be “individual accountability” and “group goals” in order for cooperative learning to be effective. The group members spend time explaining concepts to each other to ensure everyone is on the same page and so those involved in cooperative work through assignment reciprocity and elaborated explanations, gain the most (Webb, 1985).

2.3 Experiential Learning

Because of the nature of marketing and practicality of the discipline, it seems prudent to incorporate an experiential learning component as well as a way to optimize students’ chances to easily transition into their chosen profession. According to Kolb (2014) experiential learning is a “continuing inquiry into the nature of experience and the process of learning from it”. If students are sitting in a lecture hall and listening to a lecture day in and day out, hearing about certain concepts read about those concepts and write about them but never really come in contact with them then that is part of a learning process (Kolb, 2014; Keeton & Tate, 1978). It becomes experiential when you actually come in contact with it. Additionally, Hawtrey (2007) posits that experiential learning is also known as involved, situational or evidential learning and is becoming widely recognized within the university context.

Working with real businesses offer this type of experiential learning experience. The students actually come in contact with the reality. When individuals learn theories in the classroom they do not often see what can go wrong if those issues are contrasted. In an experiential atmosphere, knowledge is gained from doing. Students have a better perception of their self-efficacy levels after they have completed an applied project (Pollack et al., 2008).

According to McCarthy and McCarthy (2006) business students prefer experiential learning techniques such as job shadowing compared to non-experiential ones such as business cases. Conversely students are no longer satisfied with straight lectures (Knotts, 2011; Hawtrey, 2007), they find it boring and non-engaging. They want to see the connection between the theories and the real-world experience (Knotts, 2011; Hawtrey, 2007). Students are likely to be less engaged in the classroom if they think that the assignments have no real impact and deem these activities as made-up or instructors primarily issuing “busy work”.

2.4 Constructivism

Instructors are all charged with teaching students how to learn. One of Southwest Minnesota State University State efforts and goal is on student learning which is basically universal in all schools and colleges. But most

importantly we want students to “learn to learn” which has been the focus of many psychologists within the late 20th and early 21st century (Lyon, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1986; Erickson, 2007).

In developing future leaders, the Enactus organization framework provides a tangible opportunity for character building in students. As previously mentioned, students are not encouraged when teachers deliver case studies and by extension straight lecture. This is especially true for business students. They want to be able to see the classroom relevance to the real-world.

Therefore learning through a “social paradigm, where multiple contextual perspectives become available for student exploration” (Lyon, 2015) is applicable in this instance. Teachers can use the competition requirements and criteria as their structure to elucidate this framework. This methodology encourages student-led, realistic and applicable experiences (Lyon, 2015; Perry, 1970), where they are thinking about the big picture and applying concepts to create solutions.

3. Competition Framework

The Enactus organization is a non-profit organization that works with academics, college students and business leaders on projects that improve people’s livelihood using entrepreneurial action. The fundamental concept that underlies each project is people, profit and planet. In maintaining this focus and measuring the outcomes of these projects, the organization has implemented a five asset category criteria; financial, physical, social, human and natural to be used as a guideline. Each college team is given an academic year to work on several projects of their choice using said criteria. They are then judged and evaluated by business leaders and executives (CEOs, CFOs, CIOs, CMOs, etc.) of Fortune 500 companies through an oral presentation. Their prizes range in the tens of thousands of dollars and should they win the national competition, they are also given an opportunity to represent their country internationally in the global competition (Enactus Handbook, 2015).

To ensure these projects deliver an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable program with a significant outcome, the projects are developed based under the purview of all or some of the five asset categories. Further, the projects are evaluated based on the impact and outcomes of the target audience. A delineation of these categories follow to ensure a complete comprehension of the guidelines outlined by the organization to ensure success while improving people’s livelihood (Enactus Team Handbook, 2015).

First, the financial asset category refers to resources available for a target audience who would benefit from this project while ensuring sustainability. These financial resources range from earned income, cash, savings, job creation, micro-lending and/or business creation (Enactus Team Handbook, 2015, p. 48).

The physical asset category pertains to basic infrastructure and products necessary to support one’s livelihood. These include shelter, transportation, clean energy, access to consumer needs and sanitation. When an individual or community does not have access to physical assets, it invariably has a ripple effect and so the opportunity cost of not having access to these basic necessities affect other livelihood assets such as education and financial assets (Enactus Team Handbook, 2015, p. 48).

With regards to the human asset category, the Enactus team’s goal is to ensure that individuals or the community acquire an ability to work and/or pursue other areas where they are able to invest in themselves such as job skills, education and leadership development. Ultimately, once the team is done working with them, these individuals should be able to possess the knowledge, skills and ability to pursue different livelihood strategies (Enactus Team Handbook, 2015, p. 48).

For the social asset category, individuals are encouraged to build relationships and form social networks with a view of working together with trust and respect (Enactus Team Handbook, 2015, p. 48). Finally the natural asset category refers to the natural resources that are used and consumed to create a sustainable livelihood. This is normally done through the improvement of natural resources such as land, air, water and so on. There is also a focus on biodiversity and waste management (Enactus Team Handbook, 2015, p. 48).

Having a full understanding of these categories and being able to monitor the input, resources such as students, time, money, volunteers, facilities, supplies and equipment are dedicated to the project,. They also measure the output; work accomplished, and the outcomes; the benefits or changes within the community and/or individuals (Enactus Team Handbook, 2015, p. 46). The team then presents their results in a 17-minute presentation at a National competition before academics and Fortune 500 executives.

The Southwest Minnesota State University team worked on four main projects; a struggling small business, a project that included securing employment/job-training/education for felons/people with troubled past, a green project that included manufacturing liquid soap from used soap sourced from hotels and composting for the local community and internationally. The team had a diverse educational background including business, fine arts, social sciences and recreation. Thus, the students not only benefited and learned from the Enactus projects, networking also became an important learning experience.

4. Program and Background Design

The Enactus competition was a model used in several classes to prepare students for these projects and also guide them through the process. The students who worked on these assignments were in the advertising, retailing, e-marketing, supply-chain management and human resource management. For this paper, only the projects that involved the marketing classes will be delineated. Collaboration, cooperative and experiential learning is clearly exhibited in the implementation of these in class activities.

The local business examined was solicited if they met the Enactus organization's criteria and if they would benefit from students' involvement. This business selected for this project fit the financial, human and social asset categories which was adequate to proceed. They needed to increase their revenue, brand recognition and market share, have a cohesive working relationship; where each individual knew what their tasks were, and pursue continued education in retailing, merchandising and other specialized area such as screen printing.

The advertising class is part of the marketing curriculum and is offered every semester out of the Marketing Department at Southwest Minnesota State University (SMSU), a liberal state University. The Marketing department's goal is to provide a curriculum that includes comprehensive marketing principles and theories in tandem with practitioner experience. Students are engaged in critical, creative thinking and application (SMSU marketing department program review, 2014).

5. Concept and Application Framework

The students had multiple contextual perspectives that they had to incorporate to ensure successful completion of this project. They had to consider the objectives and goal of the business and what that entailed, and they also had to consider the criteria set out by Enactus International. Therefore this class and the competition structure followed a constructivism framework (Lyon, 2015) which was created with the use of relevant and authentic experience.

Further the class structure is based on the principle that innovative learning design was implemented to ensure practicality to the work that was being done in the classroom. A feasibility study was conducted on the small business primarily to determine capital equipment requirements, efficiency and usage for a breakeven analysis. A business overview, marketing assessment and financial assessment were completed for the feasibility study. Further, in the retail class they were required to complete extensive research on the business and prepare a written business plan. They were also required to analyze the financials to determine where the company was losing money and how best they could minimize that loss. In analyzing financials they were expected to pull on their past accounting and finance class experience. Additionally, they were also to apply and implement merchandising efforts to ensure the store was appealing to potential customers.

In the e-marketing class, the students were challenged with creating, designing and developing a company website. They were also charged with initiating social media applications for the company and train the owners on how to use these tools. Additionally marketing analytics infrastructure were implemented to evaluate and monitor online activities.

5.1 Problems and Solutions

One does not expect projects to be problem free and therefore mechanisms are implemented to ensure that when issues arise, the students are able to handle said issues. It is worth noting that part of the learning process was to have students learn from their mistakes. In other words, the instructor was not there to hold their hands through the entire process, instead the instructor mentored, coached and supported the student throughout the project completion (Lyon, 2015).

They were to initially examine the issues through collaboration and create their own solutions. This method help students assert their disagreements and uncertainties while negotiating through their social interactions (Lyon, 2015). The instructor would allow them do work on their own for four meetings and then provide a report on their progress. To ensure that the projects are student-centered and assert collaboration methodology, students were initially meeting by themselves to brainstorm what needed to be done to get this business back on track. Initially these meetings were not emitting any results. They would often talk about how to complete the project rather than looking at the key problems. Some students were talking about introducing new products and redesigning catalogues, contracting with large companies for large orders without actually reviewing their findings from the feasibility study.

Once the instructor received their progress report and realized they were off track, a guideline was provided for the students from which checkpoints were provided. Since this project was extensive, there were initial challenges to create a synergy but once the students started working on their sections, comprehending the concepts in class and continued meeting on a weekly basis, they were able to grasp each section and apply theories learned in class for project completion.

There were also some problems in analyzing the profit and loss statements and balance sheets for the small business due to incorrect entries made by the business owner. An expert consultant from the small business development center (SBDC) on campus was asked to speak to the team and guide them in their analysis. They were taught how to make entries into Quick books which they then trained the small business owner to do. As well, there were challenges with excess inventory and pricing issues which were later resolved by the students.

These projects are still part of our ongoing curriculum to ensure sustainability. And since we placed 8th in the nation in the National competition this year, the model used will be continued. Our team also won the women's economic empowerment project competition which included a monetary award of \$5000. Overall the team won

upwards of \$18,000 in cash awards, grants and prizes.

6. Conclusion

Using this methodology to teach students is really an incentive for them to start and complete tasks where they will be rewarded in other ways besides and in addition to a class grade. This method proved to be very successful because they were passionate about helping someone improve their livelihood and also see a business improve their revenue through their efforts.

Having taught retail management, advertising and e-marketing for six years without using this methodology, I have seen a marked difference in the overall passion of the students. Ordinarily, they would not meet on a set time every week to work on a case study or a website creation. There were always those that had excuses for not attending these meetings but for this competition project, everyone was on board because they knew someone's livelihood depended on their success and also they knew that they were presenting this project before business executives.

6.1 Limitations and Future Research

This paper examines the advantage of using national competition as a teaching tool and therefore it relies on individual student's passion for entering and winning a competition. There were also a few set of expectations from using this methodology. One expectation was for them to perform well in a competition with their peers, they were to obtain good grades in their project related class and other classes as well, they were to ensure that their efforts provided increased profitability and sustainability.

Further, this competition had very clear guidelines to follow and if this format is used clearly the competition would not be the same. Students were not surveyed after the application of this teaching method to determine their thoughts and feelings about this methodology. Further research needs to be done to measure the students' level of learning for the student with the use of collaborative, cooperative and experiential methods. A comparison study could have been conducted between the average grades achieved in these classes compared to classes that used case studies. This would enable the researcher to track whether experiential, cooperative, collaborative learning improves student involvement and overall learning. However, based on the results of their project and the overall revenue of the business, it is clear that this type of learning is invaluable and students were able to work with a real company without any real risks.

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